

## **Panelists: Digital tools expand learning opportunities**

**Sept. 21 discussion examines the implications of mobile devices and broadband access on education**

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Access to digital learning opportunities is critical for U.S. students' success, panelists said.

The nation's director of education technology called on schools to replace textbooks with mobile learning devices, and the head of the Federal Communications Commission said his agency would be voting this week on whether to lift some restrictions on the use of federal e-Rate funds to help deliver broadband access to more students, during a Sept. 21 panel discussion about the implications of digital-age learning.

Investments in broadband access and mobile learning devices are essential to helping students learn the skills they'll need to compete on a global scale, said panelists during "Back to School: Learning and Growing in a Digital Age," hosted by Common Sense Media, the Children's Partnership, PBS Kids, and the University of Southern California's Annenberg Center on Communication Leadership and Policy.

"In some ways, this country is in a serious crisis when it comes to education and the underinvestment in our kids over the last 30 years," said Jim Steyer, CEO and founder of Common Sense Media, during his opening remarks.

"We may not have classrooms of the 21st century, but we clearly have technology of the 21st century," he added, referencing the "warp speed-like" changes in media and technology that enable today's students to stay constantly connected to the internet and social media.

"Whether we like it or not, [these changes are] starting to affect the schools and classrooms that all of us care about so deeply," Steyer said, calling this phenomenon "both a crisis and an opportunity" for U.S. education.

Three imperatives face U.S. education today, Steyer said: Every child should be digitally literate before graduating from high school, all parents must be informed about their children's digital media lives, and every classroom needs to be a 21st-century learning environment.

Technology is making a major difference in the lives of U.S. students every day, said FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski. Children use multiple digital media devices to consume 11 hours of content a day, and teenagers send an average of one text message every 10 minutes while they are awake.

"It is striking how much technology is a part of kids' lives today," Genachowski said.

And while parents and teachers must find practical strategies to mitigate the risks of new technologies, including safeguarding students' online privacy and security, "the opportunities of new communications technologies for our kids far exceed the risks," he said. "The risks are real, but the opportunities are even larger."

To that effect, the FCC launched [Parents' Place](#) <sup>[1]</sup>, a portal with information on how parents and caregivers can help keep children safe when using technology and the internet.

"Technology can, and must, be a key part of the solution to the problems that technology creates," Genachowski said.

### **Major changes in store for the e-Rate**

Access to broadband service creates countless opportunities for innovation and workforce development, Genachowski said, adding: "We fail our students if we don't teach them basic [digital literacy] skills."

That's why the federal e-Rate program is so important, he said, noting that his agency plans to vote on Sept. 23 to make much-needed changes that will bring about a "major modernization" of the e-Rate.

"The program has met its goals in a dial-up world, but it has to be taken to the next level," he said. "No area has greater potential to transform the lives of our children than education, and no technology has greater potential to transform education than broadband internet."

The FCC plans to launch a pilot program that would let schools use e-Rate money to help pay for electronic reading devices that can download digital textbooks. The agency also plans to let schools and libraries use e-Rate funding to lease unused fiber-optic lines or pay for access over existing local and regional fiber networks to achieve faster internet connections.

Roughly half of all schools and libraries now taking advantage of the e-Rate have internet speeds of just 1.5 megabits per second, according to the commission.

The e-Rate provides discounts of up to 90 percent on the cost of telecommunications services, internet access, and the wiring, switches, file servers, and other equipment needed to bring internet access into classrooms. If the FCC's commissioners approve these ideas on Sept. 23, they would be among the biggest changes yet in the program's 12-year history.

### **eTextbooks for a new learning generation**

"I'm very excited about eTextbooks," Genachowski said. "Why shouldn't every kid have an eReader [device] that not only has the most up-to-date textbooks, but also the most advanced" interactive tools and content?

Murugan Pal, co-founder and president of the nonprofit [CK-12 Foundation](#) <sup>[2]</sup>, which aims to reduce textbook costs by using an open-content, web-based collaborative textbook model, said the nature of open electronic textbooks makes them highly adaptable for students with different needs.

Mobile devices give students the ability to access customizable versions of web-based texts from anywhere, at any time, Pal said. Schools can take an open, web-based text from CK-12's online collection and adapt it in three different ways—one for remedial students, one for students performing at grade level, and a third version for students performing above grade level.

"Any class is not going to be one size fits all," he said.

Building on what Pal said, Karen Cator, director of education technology for the U.S. Department of Education, said U.S. schools must "ensure that students have in their backpacks not a stack of textbooks, but a mobile device that has a wealth of information."

Learning in the digital age, Cator said, is "incredibly social; it's very participatory." And that has important implications for today's educators.

In fact, she said, the way most people learn today has shifted. In the past, a person might have sought the answer to a question alone, but today people tend to reach out to internet search engines and forums, friends, and social networking such as Facebook and Twitter to answer questions.

"The act of learning hasn't changed, but the opportunities for learning have fundamentally changed," Cator said. And because today's students live in such a digitally rich, always-on world, school leaders should make sure they have access to mobile devices that offer easy access to all this information.

### **Digital learning raises important questions**

The availability of digital technologies raises important questions about access and content, panelists noted.

"Do we have the right technology platforms to be able to get content out to teachers and students? What kind of content do you need in this environment? How do you use this for academic learning?" said Patrick Gaston, president of the [Verizon Foundation](#) <sup>[3]</sup>. "It's about engagement, it's about innovating."

It's also about finding ways to ensure equitable access to digital resources for every student—not an easy task in today's uncertain economic climate.

"I think this industry has an important role to play in funding public-private partnerships that can help spur innovation in multiple areas, education included," said Shawn Covell, vice president of government affairs for Qualcomm.

Qualcomm's [Wireless Reach](#) <sup>[4]</sup> program, which creates partnerships using 3G technology to improve people's lives, helped to fund Project K-Nect in Onslow County, N.C., schools. Students received smart phones with digital algebra content, which enabled teachers to push math assignments directly to students' devices, let students network with one another to solve math homework, and gave students access to online tutoring services. [Results of the pilot project](#) <sup>[5]</sup> revealed a 30-percent increase on participating students' end-of-year course exams.

"The students really are using these devices to learn the subject matter, and because they're using them in a social way, they have to learn it better, because they have to explain it to their peers," Covell said.

"It really is improving engagement—it's changing the way teachers teach, and it's changing the way students learn," she added.

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[1] Parents' Place: <http://www.fcc.gov/parents>

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[3] Verizon Foundation: <http://foundation.verizon.com/>

[4] Wireless Reach: [http://www.qualcomm.com/citizenship/wireless\\_reach/](http://www.qualcomm.com/citizenship/wireless_reach/)

[5] Results of the pilot project: <http://www.eschoolnews.com/2010/07/20/program-uses-smart-phones-to-increase-math-scores/>